

THE  
Track of the Norseman.

A MONOGRAPH

BY

JOS. STORY FAY,

OF

Wood's Holl.

MASS.



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## Track of the Norseman.



It is now well established that in the tenth century the Norsemen visited this country, and coasting down from Greenland, passed along Cape Cod, through Vineyard Sound to Narragansett Bay, where it is believed they settled. In the neighborhood of Assonet and Dighton, inscriptions upon the rocks have been found and traditions exist that there were others which have been destroyed. The name of Mount HOPE is supposed to have been given to the Indians by them, and it is a little curious that those antiquaries who have tried to identify the names in Narragansett Bay with the Norsemen did not look elsewhere on their route.

The Rev. Isaac Taylor, the author of a work published by Macmillan & Co. of London, entitled "Words and Places," dilates upon the tenacity with which the names of places adhere to them, "throwing light upon history when other records are in doubt." He shows the progress and extent of the Celtic, Norwegian and Saxon migration over Europe, by the names and terminals which still exist over that continent and even on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and says, "the knowledge of the history and migrations of such tribes must be recovered from the study of the names of the places they once inhabited, but which now know them

no more, from the names of the hills which they fortified, of the rivers by which they dwelt, of the distant mountains upon which they gazed." He says, "in the Shetlands, every local name without exception is Norwegian. The names of the farms end in ———seter or ———ster, and the hills are called ———hoy and ———holl." and yet he also says, "the name of Greenland is the only one left to remind us of the Scandinavian settlements which were made in America in the tenth century." Would the author have made this exception to his axiom as to the durability of names, had he remembered that the Norsemen called the southern coast of Massachusetts VINELAND, and then had seen that we still have "Martins" or "Martha's VINEYARD?" Had he sighted Cape Cod and entered Vineyard Sound as the Norsemen did, in rounding Monomoy Point, the south-east extremity of the cape, he would have seen on his right a high sandy hill, on or near which is the light-house, overlooking a land locked anchorage on the inside called Powder Hole;—a score or more of miles further along, across the sound on his left he would have seen the hills now called Oak Bluffs and the Highlands, and under their lee a deep bay and roadstead long known as Holmes' Hole, unfortunately changed to Vineyard Haven;—crossing over to the main-land again, a little further west, he would have come to the bold but prettily rounded hills forming the southwestern extremity of the cape, and behind them, the sheltered and picturesque harbor of Wood's Hole.

Proceeding thence towards Narragansett Bay, along the south coast of Naushon, prominent hills on the West end of that Island slope down to a roadstead for small craft, and a passage through to Buzzard's

Bay, called Robinson's Hole:—the next island is Pasque, and between its high hills and those of Nashawena, is a passage called Quick's Hole. Now these several localities are unlike each other except that all have hills in their vicinity, serving as distinguishing land marks. And why is not the word Hole as applied to them, a corruption of the Norwegian word *Holl*, meaning hill? The descriptive term Hole is not applicable to any of them, but the word *Holl* is, to the adjacent hills, while there is little else in common between them. The localities now called Quick's and Robinson's Hole are passages between Elizabeth Islands; Wood's Hole is a passage and a harbor; Holmes' Hole now known as Vineyard Haven, is a deep bay or anchorage; and Powder Hole was formerly a capacious roadstead, now nearly filled with sand.

It may seem to militate with the theory advanced, that south of Powder Hole or Monomoy Point, is a locality called on the chart Butler's Hole, which lies in the course from Handkerchief Shoal to Pollock Rip, where there is now not only no hill, but no land. But it is to be considered that almost within the memory of man there was land in that vicinity, which has been washed away by the same strong and eccentric current that has nearly filled up Powder Hole harbor and made it a sand-flat, and which still casts up on the shore large roots and remains of trees. With this in mind it is not wild to suppose that Butler's Hole marks a spot where once was an island with a prominent hill, which the sea kings called a *Holl*, and which has succumbed to the powerful abrasion of the tides which have moved Pollock Rip many yards to the eastward, and which every year make and unmake shoals in the vicinity of Nantucket and Cape Cod.

It would seem a matter of course that the Norsemen after their long and perhaps rough voyages, when once arrived in the sheltered waters and harbors of Vineyard Sound should have become familiar with them and should have lingered there to recruit and refit, before proceeding westward; or on their return, to have waited there to gather up resources before venturing out on the open ocean. Indeed it is recorded in their sagas, that they brought off boat loads of grapes from those pleasant shores. What more probable than that they cultivated friendly relations with the natives, and in coming to an understanding with them on subjects in common, should have told them the Norwegian terms for the hills and headlands of their coast, and that the Indians in the paucity of their own language, should have adopted the appellative *Holl* which they were told signified hill, so important as a landmark to these wandering sea-kings! Why may not the Norseman have called them so, until the natives adopted the same title, and handed it down to the English explorers under Bartholomew Gosnold who gave their own patronymics to those several *Holls*, or *Holes* as now called? The statement of "the oldest inhabitant" of Wood's Hole, on being asked where the word *Hole* came from, is, that he "always understood that it came from the indians."

There being no harbor on the shores of Martha's Vineyard island west of Holmes' Hole, the voyagers would naturally follow the north shore of the Sound and become familiar with the Elizabeth Islands, and be more likely to give names to the localities on that side than on the other. Between Wood's Hole and Holmes' Hole the Sound is narrowest, and they would be apt to frequent either harbor as the winds

and tide might make it safe or convenient for them.

It seems to confirm the views here advanced that in no other part of this Continent or of the world, where the English have settled, is to be commonly found the local name of Hole, and yet here in a distance of sixty miles, the thoroughfare of these bold navigators, there are no less than five such, still extant. How can it be explained except because it is "the track of the Norsemen?" It is not natural or probable, with their imperfect means of navigation, that they should have passed from Greenland to Narragansett Bay, leaving distinct traces in each, and yet to have ignored the whole intervening space, and not to have lingered awhile on the shores where they found grapes by the boat load, and which must have been as fair and pleasant in those days as they are now. It is to be hoped that at least, our people will not be in haste to wipe out the local names of Vineyard Sound, when it is so likely that they are the oldest on the Continent and give to Massachusetts a priority of discovery and settlement over her sister States. Only let us correct the spelling, and give proper significance to them by calling the places now named HOLE by the appropriate title of HOLL.

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